DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 255 UD 014 789

AUTHOR	Clarke, Stephen J.
TITLE	Alternatives in Public Education: A Summary.
SPONS AGENCY	New England School Development Council, Newton, Mass.
PUB DATE	21 May 74
NOTE	21p.; A summary of a conference sponsored by the New England School Development Council (Bedford, New Hampshire, May 1974)
AVAILABLE FROM	New England School Development Council, 55 Chapel Street, Newton, Massachusetts 02160 ($1.00, prepaid)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.76 HC Not Available from EDRS. PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Community Involvement; Curriculum Development; *Educational Alternatives; Educational Change; Elementary Schools; High Schools; Individualized Instruction; Junior High Schools; *Public Education; School Community Relationship; *School Organization; Suburban Schools; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	Connecticut; *Massachusetts

ABSTRACT

The conference program included four alternative schools which are really unique in that each of the four schools operates with the expressed approval of the board of education or school committee in its particular community and each receives some portion of its support, both financial and moral, from the same board of education or school committee. These are not rejections of the system, they are expressions of the willingness of the system to offer alternatives to itself. The South Arsenal Neighborhood Development Corporation Everywhere school is but one of the products of concentrated neighborhood efforts, over the past 10 years, to improve living conditions in Hartford, Connecticut. The community of Arlington, Massachusetts, has two satellite junior high school programs operating in two separate locations. Each accommodates 100 youngsters in grades 7 and 8. Worcester, Massachusetts has so many alternative school programs that they have been combined under one administrative office. Basically, these alternative programs break down into two categories--General Alternative Programs and Specialized Alternative Programs which are designed for "school phobics," truants and recalcitrant students. A model for many local alternative high schools is The Home Base School in Watertown, Massachusetts. (Author/JM)

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alternatives in public education

A Summary

A Summary

of a Conference

sponsored by the

New England School Development Council

May 21, 1974

at

The Sheraton-Wayfarer Motor Inn

Bedford, New Hampshire

UD 014 789

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INTRODUCTION

NESDEC's conference on *Alternatives in Public Education* brought to the participants leaders of four local alternative schools who shared their unique experiences in this newest form of public schooling.

Ms. Gwendolyn M. Wilkes of Hartford, Connecticut described her experiences as the Master Teacher of *The Everywhere School* which is an elementary school sanctioned by the Hartford Board of Education, but largely supported by a local neighborhood developer.

Mr. Ned B. Schofield, Principal of the *Arlington Satellite Junior High Schools*, Arlington, Massachusetts narrated a slide presentation showing the variety of activities in which his youngsters participate during the course of their day at one of the country's few junior-high-level alternative schools.

Mr. William C. Allard, Director of the *Worcester Alternative School*, Worcester, Massachusetts made a dramatic presentation of the beginnings, the growth, and the present status of the alternative high school program which he directs in mid-Massachusetts.

Mr. John Sakala, Program Chairman of the *Home Base School*, Watertown, Massachusetts shared the session with his Program Manager, Ms. Peggy McNeill.

In bringing these leaders in alternative schooling together, the NESDEC conference explained, for the several hundred participants, the idea of alternative schooling about which so many had heard but so few have actually had the chance to study first hand.

THE S.A.N.D. EVERYWHERE SCHOOL
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

This unique alternative elementary school is but one of the products of concentrated neighborhood efforts, over the past ten years, to improve living conditions in the South Arsenal neighborhood in Connecticut's largest city. This neighborhood effort to uplift the area grew into what is now known as SAND—the South Arsenal Neighborhood Development Corporation. SAND is a national "first" in that it is the developer for the neighborhood which it represents. From kitchen table meetings ten years ago, SAND grew until it eventually was named the principal developer for almost fifty million dollars in neighborhood development projects.

SAND is now housed in a local warehouse which shares its office facilities with *The Everywhere School*. This alternative school grew out of SAND and general neighborhood dissatisfaction with the Arsenal School, which had been built before the turn of the century and was dangerously overcrowded and understaffed. SAND discovered, for example, that the Board of Education had condemned the building in 1936, and they then decided that this public school was grossly insufficient to fit into SAND's dreams for the South Arsenal neighborhood children. So SAND decided that a school, under local neighborhood control, would better serve the children of South Arsenal and that this school should be available to all, both day and evening, and that its services should be spread throughout the community. Hence, the idea and the name for the school were born.

The *SAND Everywhere School* actually opened in 1969 after the Hartford Board of Education granted its approval for such a school in the South Arsenal neighborhood. But before this permission was granted, the Board of Education de-

manded that the SAND developers come up with specific plans for the school describing its facilities and the school concept and organizational program. Even after this initial approval by the Board of Education, achievement testing is still conducted by the Board in order to be assured that the youngsters at *Everywhere* are not being educationally short-changed by being a part of this alternative program.

The Everywhere School concept basically provides for the following:

1. Visible and whole accessibility to the total community, providing a variety of educational opportunities for everyone.
2. Transference of motivational and instructional responsibilities to the learner with the teacher serving as a responsible guide.
3. A change in children's attitudes toward themselves and learning.
4. Assistance in developing children to become independent, responsible, thinking adults.

When renovating the warehouse which houses *The Everywhere School*, the school organizers, with the help of architect Jack Dollard, transformed the vast expansions of open space into two MIA's or Multi-Instructional Areas. These two open areas or MIA's cover some 14,000 square feet of floor space and provide ample learning and activity space for *Everywhere*'s 250 youngsters. The student population is made up of approximately sixty percent black and forty percent Puerto Rican youngsters who are served by a certified instructional staff of nine teachers and some twelve paraprofessionals. The school day is rather rigidly divided into instructional time for reading and language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, and each of these broad curricular divisions has its own special section of space in the two Multi-Instructional Areas. There are also spaces for a reading corner, a playtime area, and a creative writing corner. The staff felt at the outset that they should concentrate on the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic because their lack was the main parental

objection to the local Arsenal School which their children previously attended. The primary purpose for the existence of *The Everywhere School* was to provide neighborhood youngsters a viable alternative to the abuses of the Arsenal instructional program, and so the staff offers no apologies for its "no nonsence," "back to the basics" instructional program. However, this rigidity is mainly reserved for the morning hours of the school day with the afternoon program being more open in its structure.

The two MIA's are divided. The kindergartens through third grade are in the lower house, and the fourth through sixth grades in the upper house. Each child is assigned to a staff member when he enters the school and these staff members and their assignees are known as Home Base. They operate much like a homeroom in the traditional school. Each member of the instructional staff is screened by the school's Parent Advisory Council which makes strong recommendations to the Board of Education. Consequently, the staff of 21 is singularly concerned about kids and willing to operate an instructional program built specifically around the needs of those kids. As a result of this kind of community concern and control, *The Everywhere School* has succeeded, after only four years of operation, in reducing the truancy rate in the community to zero and pushing the attendance rate to that of any suburban elementary school.

Part of the success of *The Everywhere School* is due to the fact that much of the school's program is geared specifically to the ethnic backgrounds of the youngsters. There are courses in African Culture and Black History and a variety of school-wide annual festivals, like the Goa Festival in November, the Kwanza Festival at Christmas-time, and three Spanish culture festivals. The whole school participates in every festival and, therefore, each culture becomes acquainted with the other. Another reason for the school's marked success is the Environmental Extention Program which moves the youngsters out of the South Arsenal neighborhood to look at the rest of the Hartford area. Two local prep schools, the Loomis-Chaffee and the Westledge, share facilities and exchange programs with the South Arsenal youngsters and their teachers.

The prep schools offer their library and science facilities for extensions of *Everywhere* courses, and the *Everywhere* kids and staff offer courses in Black and Spanish culture in return. The Environmental Extension Program also has a similar arrangement with a local Hartford museum. At regular intervals during the school year, the kids all pile on the school bus and spend a day "on the road." This provides a good deal of the much needed enrichment that the South Arsenal youngsters could get no other way.

The Hartford Board of Education has approved a new school for the South Arsenal area and SAND will be the developer. The plans are to build a new *Everywhere School* along the same lines as the old school, using the MIA organizational format. But since the new school will ultimately be serving a remodeled neighborhood of some 270 housing units, 162 high-rise apartment units, and 108 units in ten townhouse style buildings, SAND and the *Everywhere* staff have decided to scatter five MIA units throughout the development to serve the community on a still more decentralized and localized basis. The central administration for the new *Everywhere School* will be located in the proposed Neighborhood Life Center. City school bond funds have been secured and so have the educational specifications for the new *Everywhere School*. And when this is all completed, SAND can say proudly, "We did it—together."

ARLINGTON SATELLITE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS
ARLINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

The junior high school level is too often slighted by educational innovation, but happily this is not the case in the community of Arlington which has not one, but two, satellite junior high school programs operating in two separate locations. One of these alternative schools is housed on the first floor of the local Boys' Club. It is called Spy Pond East and accommodates 100 youngsters in grades seven and eight. The other school, called the Central School, occupies the oldest school building in Arlington and it also has 100 students in grades seven and eight. Ned Schofield, a young and unassuming doctoral candidate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is the Principal of the two-school program.

These two alternative junior high schools, like their principal, are low-key operations which try to blend basic instruction in small groups, and a widely varied activity program that has wide appeal for both the small staff and the youngsters at the school. Arlington is a community that is now much more ethnically and racially mixed than in previous years, and the Satellite Schools reflect this mixture. Many languages are spoken by the students and their family backgrounds differ from the well-educated to the undereducated. The school attempts to serve everyone according to the student's individual needs. This scope of needs causes some problems, but the varied and active program that has been developed at the schools has helped solve most of those problems.

Outdoor activities make up a significant portion of the Satellite programs. A group climbed Mt. Monadnock this year and brought 12 special education youngsters along and paired them off with the Satellite kids to give them a taste of adult

responsibility. It also helped the Satellite kids forget their fear of heights as they helped their "buddies" make the climb with them. Four times a year the Satellites run their version of the Olympics when the students compete in 35 separate events for both boys and girls. The activities involve everything from chess tournaments to arm wrestling and street hockey. Some Central School kids buried a time capsule in the back yard of their school. The event was totally student initiated and grew out of a course taught jointly by a social studies teacher and a student. The capsule is scheduled to be opened in—you guessed it—1984!

The science program at the two schools utilizes the facilities of the Parker River Wildlife Sanctuary on Plum Island and many field trips are taken to the wildlife reserve during the school year. The day after school closed this year, a group of 22 kids went on a seven-day bike trip to Provincetown, Massachusetts and then returned by boat. For trips like these, the participating students have to raise their own money. This is done with parental cooperation by running bake sales.

Another group of Satelliters is taking an annual five-day camping trip in June to Camp Wakeela, Maine. Still another group of boys operates an afternoon hockey program and they use proceeds from the bake sales to finance the use of the local hockey rink. All this activity is made possible through the generous contribution of time of the dedicated staff members at both schools. In fact, this generosity extends daily into the late afternoon and evening hours. As Principal Schofield puts is, "Good teachers are very mobile." So one of the real problems at the Satellite Schools is keeping the instructional staff from one academic year to another.

One can get some idea of the range of abilities and experience on the Satellite staff from a few examples. The shop teacher is finishing his doctorate in philosophy at Boston College, speaks fluent French and German, and is a world traveler. It is not difficult to see that Salmon Fiske will be hard to hold onto once his studies are completed and he gets

the urge to travel again. The mathematics teacher spent two years living in Mexico and is fluent in Spanish, so he and one of the Spanish-speaking students team-teach a course in Spanish at the school. It is not unusual for students and teachers to team up to offer a course in a field of their mutual expertise. Nor is it unusual to have parents get into the act as well. Principal Schofield, himself, has teamed up with a Black mother and together they offer a course on ethnic studies for English and social studies units. The Black mother covers the Black culture while Schofield teaches the Irish-American segment of the course.

One parent comes in at Christmas-time to show the students how to make Swedish gingerbread houses. Another, who is Russian-born, offered to teach the recorder to interested students. Some volunteer students from the Harvard Divinity School developed a course on religions and it is conducted by visiting the various churches in the area. The course combines religion, culture, architecture and history. This, in brief, is the nature of *The Arlington Satellite Junior High Schools*—fun plus interest, motivation and a variety of learning experiences. On a more philosophical bent, Principal Schofield sees the schools primarily as resource centers where choices are possible and where minds are deliberately molded. Initially, the students and staff knew what approach they did *not* want the Satellite Schools to take. As time passed, the staff became convinced that kids needed to know how to read and write and that became a non-negotiable item in the instructional program. Mr. Schofield noted that this insistance on the basics alienated several liberal parents who wanted the Satellite Schools to be completely free—but, he was quick to point out, their kids already knew how to read and write and many of his students did not. Alternative school people generally want no part of structure until they realize that the primary reason for alternatives is that the traditional schools aren't working. Often, they don't work because of the fact that many kids simply could not read and write when they arrived at the high school level.

Arlington is a conservative community and one wonders what an alternative school program, like the Satellites, is do-

ing there in the first place. It wasn't easy working through the officialdom, but once they could see the need for such a program, the Satellite Schools got official approval from the School Committee and the project was launched. What changes have the Satellite Schools generated? As examples, the two traditional public junior high schools have been newly organized on a cluster basis after the model provided by *The Arlington Satellite Schools*, the result being the scheduling of groups of 100 students to teams of four teachers.

WORCESTER ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL
WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

The city of Worcester, Massachusetts has so many alternative school programs that they have been combined under one administrative office under the direction of Mr. Eugene Applebaum, Worcester's Supervisor of Program Development. Basically, these alternative programs break down into two categories—General Alternative Programs in which students choose to participate and where there is a good cross-section of representation from all parts of the city, and Specialized Alternative Programs which are designed for "school phobics," truants and recalcitrant students.

The conference participants heard from Mr. William C. Allard, Director of one of the General Alternative Programs, *The Worcester Alternative School*. This program, just completing its second full year of operation, is designed for high school students, grades nine through twelve. Its present enrollment has been set at 165 students with a staff of seven. The program grew out of a felt need, by some in the city, that too little use was being made of the wide variety of community resources available in the immediate area. Within the city limits, for example, are nine colleges and universities and one of the finest art museums, for its size, in the world. The city was also feeling a population shift in that the public schools for the past three years were losing some 400 students annually. With many very small schools in the system, some consolidation, especially at the elementary level, was taking place. This left several small elementary schools vacant which could be used to house some of these alternative school pro-

grams. *The Worcester Alternative School* is housed in one of these older school buildings.

The school first opened in April, 1972 with 55 students, no program and few precedents upon which to rely. This April to June period was set aside as a planning time when both students and faculty would determine just what it was they wanted to do with this newfound opportunity. As with similar programs in other communities, they had more protest then program. They had a clearer idea of what they did not want than what they did want. The following September, the school recruited its total enrollment of 165 students. They still hadn't come up with a clear idea of what they wanted to do with themselves, and now they had more than triple the number of students to contend with.

According to Mr. Allard, alternative schools need to have a high tolerance for failure and a staff of teachers willing to look at education differently. The Worcester program had both of these. They had a clear idea they wanted to make full use of the resources of the city, but they also had a notion they did not want to completely break off relations with the city high schools, for they could be seen as possible resource centers, as well. So the staff began the long and time-consuming process of building an instructional program for their alternative school. And a few unique ground rules were formulated in the process. The instructional staff and the students could organize a course on the basis of individual need, but it had to be of such character that it would be self-sufficient. That is, it would not only have to attract students, but, even more difficult, hold onto them.

The staff also arranged for academic credit to be given for any course sponsored by *The Worcester Alternative School* which is offered in the Worcester public schools, local colleges and universities, and the community. But the community-based programs were slow in developing so the school ended up offering more than 40 courses. The school discarded both the Carnegie Unit and the standard grading systems in favor of a point system of their own, whereby one has to

accumulate 300 points to graduate. In place of grades, all students are evaluated subjectively and all diplomas are granted by the student's home base high school.

Students are chosen by lot, proportionately from the four city high schools, and by this method the school hopes to get a representative number of students. Staff members are assigned as guides for the students and each staff member has complete control over the student's program. The school has attracted youngsters at both extremes of the academic ability range. Some super kids from the top of the high school class come to the school because the traditional high school has nothing left to attract them; and there are some kids from the bottom of the range and they come to do nothing. They are merely escaping from something worse in the regular school. And it is the job of *The Worcester Alternative School* to serve and stimulate all of them. According to Mr. Allard, our society is information rich and action poor, and what his school is trying to do is rebalance the equation between information and activity. Traditional high schools are still operating on the opposite supposition, and they still are supplying information and placing less emphasis on action. This is why his school is attractive to youngsters at either end of the ability range.

Some of the city high schools are happy when Allard takes those kids who are turned off to school, but on the other hand, they are disturbed when their top students want to attend *The Worcester Alternative School* as well.

The students in *The Worcester Alternative School* have changed faculty and student opinion regarding such schools by emphasizing that when an alternative school student comes into a chemistry, English or mathematics class in the regular high school, he is the only one in that class who has freely chosen to be there. Knowing this has added a great deal of prestige to those select teachers that attract alternative school students into their classes. The same holds true for the alternative school staff. Those whose classes attract and hold

onto their alternative school students are considerably rewarded by such student attraction to their teaching.

What Mr. Allard and his staff at *The Worcester Alternative School* are trying to do with their program is to produce students who do not passively accept life as it comes, but who actively reach out for their own choices and thereby shape their own lives.

HOME BASE SCHOOL
WATERTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS

A model for many local alternative high schools is *The Home Base School* in Watertown, Massachusetts, for it has four years of experience in this newest of educational ventures. Its first year of operation, 1970-71, was used exclusively for planning and for hiring staff members. The school officially opened for students in the fall of 1971 when 100 students and seven staff members settled into the basement of St. James Armenian Church on Mt. Auburn Street. In those early days there was a good deal of local opposition to the idea but the school held firm, and after two full years of operation has won the respect and confidence of a much larger portion of the townspeople.

The principle reason for this change of heart in conservative Watertown is that the school's first graduating class had absolutely no trouble getting into colleges of their choice. In fact, the record was quite impressive their first year and even more so the second. Out of the 1972 graduating class from Watertown High School, students who matriculated at *Home Base* are now attending such schools as Antioch, Boston University, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Union, and Emerson College. Of the 26 *Home Base School* members of the 1973 graduating class, 21 students were going on to attend colleges such as Antioch, Syracuse, Jackson, Williams, Vassar, Wheelock, Boston University, Northeastern, and Salem State College.

The educational program at *Home Base* is divided into several subjects: language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, fine arts and crafts, and vocational and industrial arts. The students make free use of community resources since the

school is on a trolley line providing inexpensive access to Harvard Square and downtown Boston. *Home Base* students also use the available resources provided by Watertown High School where almost half of the *Home Base* students were enrolled in 18 different activities in the areas of foreign languages, business skills, and driver education. Another group of *Home Base* students have participated in a teacher-aide program in the elementary schools and in various nursery and Head Start programs in Watertown.

More than 100 resource people from the surrounding communities have participated in the various on-going programs at *Home Base*. These people have been solicited by the staff or by the students themselves, and they bring to the educational program at the school an astounding range of courses and activities. Aside from the standard fare *Home Base* offers in math, science, language arts, social sciences, creative arts, and occupational skills, unique programs are also offered in areas such as experimental theatre, music theory, photography, newspaper, and karate. And learning experiences in the community are offered by such organizations as Perkins Institute for the Blind, Franklin Park Zoo, Coombs Motors, Boston University Medical Center, Waltham Hospital, and Channel 2 Television. One of the more unique programs at the school is the required introductory course for new matriculants which offers the new students some help in the area of decision-making, how to make use of community resources, and how to derive maximum benefit from each learning experience.

The grading system at the school has been given careful scrutiny over the years and, at the present time, the following grading procedure is in effect. First, a thorough record of the student's accomplishments is reported and reviewed on a monthly basis. Students are encouraged through this evaluation process to complete the projects within the given time span agreed upon at the outset. A regular process of communication exists between the student and his staff advisor, his teachers, and his parents. In effect the actual staff role at *Home Base* is largely that of student advisor and counselor, helping students to define and sharpen their interests, develop

their own programs, and carry them through to satisfactory completion. Finally, a standardized student report is compiled and its format is designed both to fit the evaluative criteria of the alternative school program and to meet the demands for concise reporting from outside agencies, such as colleges.

The colleges and universities seem to be satisfied with the new form devised at *Home Base*, but the staff in order to insure proper processing of a student's records, usually accompanies the student to the college for the initial interview to help explain the types of educational experiences the student has had at *Home Base*.

Home Base is an autonomous community in that there is a total involvement policy in the decision-making process at the school—both staff and students are involved in every major decision. Staff and students are also involved in faculty hiring. The *Home Base* staff has to be of a very special breed, for the average staff member works about 80 hours per week since the building is usually open from eight in the morning until eight in the evening. *Home Base*, needless to say, does not follow the negotiated contract for the instructional staff of the Watertown Public Schools and this often causes some problems.

Home Base teachers also face other problems because of their unique positions in the alternative school. For example, they are regular Watertown Public Schools teachers and thus are subject to the same evaluation procedures as other Watertown teachers, but they are also expected to participate in the self-evaluation program of the *Home Base School*. In this process the staff member writes an evaluation of himself and his activities in the school, and then asks staff and students to read it and sign if they agree. As Program Chairman John Sakala puts it, "You can't do a bad job at *Home Base School* because there's no place to hide."

The students also evaluate the resource people who participate in the various programs at the school. If a resource person is not a high quality professional, he doesn't have a place at *Home Base*. In a sense, the entire procedure at *Home Base* is one of constant evaluation of both formal and infor-

mal kinds. Staff, students, and volunteers are always in the limelight because the place is so open and easily injured by its weakest member.

The Home Base School has, in three short years of operation, become a permanent and accepted member of the Watertown Public Schools which probably goes to prove that if the need is great enough, the public and its schools will respond and provide for a solution.

What is really unique about the four alternative schools included in the conference program is that each of them is an alternative to the traditional schools; but each of them is also within the traditional school system. Each of these four schools operates with the expressed approval of the board of education or school committee in its particular community and each receives some portion of its support, both financial and moral, from the same board of education or school committee. These are not rejections of the system, they are expressions of the willingness of the system to offer alternatives to itself. This is a strong and positive sign that the public school system, so roundly derided by its critics as insensitive and immoveable, is rather a public agency that has the best interests of its clients—the youngsters— in mind. If this NESDEC conference on *Alternatives in Public Education* demonstrated nothing else but this single point, then it was very worthwhile.